



## Duxbury Field Notes

By FAHY BYGATE

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I awoke this morning to the sound of a huge rock band playing 6 or 7 inches from my left ear. As it turned out, it was a car, a mobile boom box, passing our house on our usually quiet street. The owner of the traveling noise pollution was, I presume, on his way to his jet ski to terrorize the fish in Duxbury Bay. When the car went by, the racket put into the air the dozens of blackbirds feeding at our feeders. I didn't have to think twice to decide which of the 2 was the most annoying but perhaps everyone doesn't enjoy enormous groups of birds.

For a couple of weeks, now, these mixed flocks of Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds and Starlings have been gathering. It seems that once the young have been launched, the adults form gangs and meet regularly to chat, argue, debate, and make plans for the impending trip south. At my house, we enjoy these dramatic crowds of black presences in our trees and love the loud "whoosh" that their collective wings make as they rise in a cloud when I wave my hand at them. However, we may be alone in our affection for what some see as the pests of the avian world.

I looked up the subject of birds as pests in Christopher Leahy's wonderful *The Birdwatcher's Companion*. Chris takes a tolerant attitude toward most of these problems, conceding however that sometimes large groups of birds can become hazardous to man. Much of the crop damage done to American farms is caused by birds; a fungus from the droppings of large groups of birds can be dangerous to people but close contact is necessary for this to happen; many city birds such as English sparrows and Starlings annoy humans with their noise and their messiness. More seriously, large flocks of birds have been implicated in a few airplane crashes. Logan Airport has a complicated program that once included using Snowy Owls to keep birds off runways. Some hawks and eagles are considered pests when they attack small and weak stock animals and many home birders who put out bird feed are horrified to see a Sharpshinned Hawk nail a House Finch at the sunflower feeder. Birds annoy us in other ways. Woodpeckers, Cardinals and many others will drive home owners crazy by attacking "rival" birds seen in picture windows or drumming for weeks on aluminum siding. Birds crash into our cars, fall down our chimneys and sometimes even attack us directly. But, despite all of this, what should we do if anything about birds as pests?

The *Companion* says: "It is possible to argue that people living in North America today have a better opportunity to enjoy the exquisite complexities of the natural world than anyone ever has or will. We no longer have to fear the wilderness and its inhabitants as threatening to our well-being. Most of us have the leisure to explore and study the natural aspects of our extraordinary planet, aided by a wealth of illustrated books which describe species of plants, birds, mammals, insects, etc. And we have not yet committed ourselves to the necessity of living in 'controlled atmospheres' underground or in space. It is pitiful, then, that so many people regard the other animals with which they share space as a menace rather than a rare luxury. If you have a

'bird problem' which is not discussed (here), take a minute to consider (1) whether it is really a problem and (2) whether the solution might be found in a slight reassessment of your values rather than a massive disruption of a fellow earthling." The real question now is: are drivers of mobile boom boxes *really* fellow earthlings?